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Letters to a Dying Student: Bavinck's Letters to Johan van Haselen

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Between Autumn 1886 and March 1887 Herman Bavinck wrote four letters to Johan van Haselen, a student in Kampen who died at the age of twenty-one.* In 2010 Wiljan Puttenstein, head librarian at the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit in Amsterdam, transcribed and chronicled the letters, and thanks are due to him for making them available in electronic format.¹

These letters are striking for a variety of reasons. They present an intimate picture of Bavinck in a new light: rather than a dogmatician or an ethicist, we find here a pastor and a friend. Although the letters hint at Bavinck's bookish nature—the third letter's reference to him spending a holiday in his office, where his “books were [his] true company,” for example—they also reveal a distinctly human figure, one who encourages a young man facing death and who, in so doing, could engage gracefully with the ultimate and the quotidian. And for those of us who are theological educators, these letters remind us that our students' lives include suffering, illness, and perhaps even premature death. Bavinck's example is that of a teacher willing to offer comfort and theological consolation in that context.

Opportunity to observe the application of Bavinck's thought when forced by circumstance to reflect on the issues of life and death is also interesting. Of particular significance is the manner in which he consoles van Haselen, a young man no doubt deeply

* I would like to thank my colleague Wolter Huttinga, PhD student at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen, for proofreading my translation.

1. See Wiljan Puttenstein, “‘Mijn boeken houden mij trouw gezelschap.’ Vier brieven van Herman Bavinck aan een student,” <http://goo.gl/CcY5h>.

pained at his enforced departure from his studies in Kampen, by emphasizing that Kampen was really quite dull and that its students were not entirely happy with their lot there. Heaven, in comparison, meant being with Christ, which was far better.

At the time of writing Bavinck was an unmarried man in his early thirties. His correspondence from that time hints at various personal struggles. He pined for Leiden University's superior library and was no doubt conscious of Kuyper's Amsterdam—then in the throes of the Doleantie—as *the* place to be in the Netherlands. For example, on 1 January 1887, the day after Bavinck's third letter to van Haselen, he writes to his friend Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje: "How often I long for the Leiden library! And how gladly I would move from Kampen to Leiden or Amsterdam. Here [in Kampen] we live so far away and are becoming so provincial!"² Evidently, Bavinck felt rather unsettled in Kampen at that time.

Additionally, it is worth noting that his correspondence with Hurgronje in 1885 deals with Hurgronje's recently published "Mijne reis naar Arabië," a celebrated account of his journey to Mecca.³ Kampen, in comparison, most likely seemed a less glamorous location to the young Bavinck. Writing to Hurgronje a year before van Haselen's death, he remarks, "Not much has changed here in the Netherlands, I think, or if so, I do not know of it. It seems to me that in each area, also in that of the academy, we live in a time of malaise."⁴

Bavinck's letters to Hurgronje from this time, of course, make no mention of van Haselen. However, in reading of Bavinck's own discontent in this period, it is worth noting that involvement with van Haselen's care no doubt had its own impact on his mood in these years.

2. "Hoe dikwerf verlang ik naar de Leidsche bibliotheek! En hoe gaarne zou ik metterwoon van Kampen naar Leiden of Amsterdam verhuizen. We wonen hier zoo achteraf en worden zoo kleinstedsch!" Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse vriendschap* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 131.

3. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 'Mijne reis naar Arabië,' in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 26th and 27th November 1885. See also de Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 125–26.

4. de Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 125.

In writing to van Haselen about the less exciting aspects of life in Kampen, Bavinck adopts a tone quite different to that of his letters to Hurgronje. He does not speak the language of “malaise” or write critically of Kampen’s poorly stocked library; in fact, Bavinck stresses the opposite, writing of the books in Kampen as his friends. No doubt his letters to van Haselen are informed by a gracious pragmatism. Life in Kampen during the years in question was probably less boring than Bavinck makes out. However, it served little good to remind van Haselen of the more positive aspects of study there when the reality to which he was being ushered—that of Christ’s presence in heaven—truly was much better.

Letter 1

Kampen, Autumn 1886

Very Dear Friend,

I had thought of writing to you earlier, but I was waiting for word from you which, at this point at least, has not yet come. However, I understand well that you will feel no desire or strength with which to write. Therefore, having assumed that your condition is not improving, I will not postpone my intention any longer.

I would much rather write having heard that you were gaining strength and would shortly be able to return to Kampen. But it seems that this is not the Lord’s will. Certainly, all things are possible with Him. He is the Healer of Israel, even when all hope is lost (humanly speaking). He is the Almighty, who can do away with sickness and grant health. I also sincerely hope that the Lord would still lengthen your days and give back your strength and once again use you as a worker in his vineyard. Alongside you, your parents, and your family I pray and beg Him that He would once more grant this and would make us joyful together with you by His mighty deeds.

But I cannot disguise the facts at hand. Sometimes I fear that the Lord’s path can be very different from that for which we would wish. We know nothing. Our knowledge is yesterday’s. The Lord’s thoughts are different from our own. I can understand that it will be difficult and hard to give you confidence through these thoughts. So young and so fully in the prime of life—who would not shudder at

the thought of death. To do so requires grace, but, after that, grace is also needed to want to die. Grace to be at one with God's will, to deny one's own will, and with joy and in quietness to follow the Lord. Only the Christian can do this, who through faith has given himself over to the Great Leader and is now assured that nothing shall separate him from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus his Lord.

And is it not so, my friend? You know something of this. You seek your salvation and blessing through and in Him alone. You know and confess it: in me, there is nothing but sin and guilt, nothing that can stand before God's face. But God made the one who knew no sin to be sin for me, so that I would become God's righteousness in Him. But then there is no distress. Then we can die. Then death becomes victory, a passage to eternal life. Then you stand to lose nothing in this life, the sum of which is difficulty and sorrow, and we all must set it aside sooner or later. I hope, should the Lord's plan be to take you away—and I pray this of Him, that He would strengthen you in the faith and in the blessed hope of the resurrection—that He would bring this life to an end and focus the eye of your faith on Him who has won over death, who has achieved eternal life, in whom is our life, and in whom we have open access to the Father's House where there are many mansions and to which He has gone to prepare a place for us.

I do not dare to ask you to write a short letter to me; it will certainly be too much of a bother to you or be something you simply do not wish to do. In that case I would not wish to ask it. But otherwise, I would be so grateful to know, even if just in a single word, how you are bearing up under all of this. I was so grateful to hear from your own mouth that you had given yourself over to the Lord's will and also that you named his doing Majestic and Glorious.

I know how He can take us from life. When my friend Unink died some years ago in Almelo—also young and having only been a minister for but a few months—he had been prepared for some time and had given himself over to the Lord. And when I met my friend Dr. Klinkert this summer, a few weeks before his death, he also knew that in dying he went to be with Jesus. I was jealous when he said this. No, I did not envy him, but the question came to me: if I could say this with such certainty, and if I also lived in this firm faith, I would be able to, I would want to die.

No, then there is truly not much in this life that could suppress or remove our longing for the glory of [being] God's children. Then, if you can say this—to be with Christ, which to me is by far the best—then my dear friend, you are going before us. And then may God grant that we might follow you to where there shall be no more death.

Here in Kampen, we carry on quietly and peacefully. Normal life goes on in its normal way. There is little change and little movement. You shall certainly hear from some of the students from time to time. Your name is still mentioned often with much concern. Now, dear friend, the Lord bless you in all of your circumstances, in body and soul. The Lord restore and heal you, or should His will be otherwise, the Lord prepare you and us for His coming and make us go forth in peace.

Your loving friend,

H. Bavinck

PS: It is Saturday evening. I had enough time and thus wrote now. I am posting the letter today so that it will reach you quickly. Tomorrow I must preach. I hope to remember you with the congregation in prayer. How glorious is it that our prayers are united in heaven above.

HB

Letter 2

Kampen, Monday evening [December 1886]

Very Dear Friend,

I felt compelled to write to you once more. Your letter, and also that which I heard about you from Prof. Wielenga, has made me deeply happy. And I thought you would find it welcome if you could hear something from Kampen. There is not much news here. Life carries on as usual. Each day is largely the same as the other. But that is perhaps for the best. We are beginning (slowly) to look towards the holiday. That said, time has flown by, and I can scarcely believe that we are already so near to Christmas and New Year.

Our time has probably not passed as slowly as yours. If one is healthy and has work, the days pass as quickly as seconds. But then we also forget to number our days so that our hearts become wise. God uses illness and adversity as excellent teaching means to train us for heaven. In illness He turns our soul from the earthly and strips us of all that upon which we so lightly build on—our health and powers, our work and industry—and He draws us to Himself so that we would seek our stability and strength in Him. And then, when received by us as God's messenger, illness brings forth the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Sometimes I still have a quiet hope that you shall become better. I pray to God for this, that He would restore you fully to your parents and family and would give you back to us all. But I was nonetheless made glad that you are at one with God's will, whatever that may be.

His will is always wise and holy and good. To follow Him as a child is also—under pressure and testing—blessedness. May God grant that you would remain in this humble position. May He be good to you in every way, glorify His grace in you, and make you bear witness with Paul: whether I live or die, I am the Lord's.

I thank you heartily for your dear letter. You certainly exhausted yourself in writing it. I was so thankful with but a few sentences. Still, now that you have written, I am so glad. If you should have the desire and strength to write a few words, you know how pleased I would be to receive it. But please do not exhaust or overly strain yourself on account of me.

Greet your parents on my behalf. May God bless you in His grace now and always, in body and soul.

From your loving friend,

H. Bavinck

Letter 3

[Kampen, 31 December 1886]

Amicissime,

I have little time, but I did not want this year to end without writing a few words to you. A turning point in our lives is always important. The change from one year to another calls each of us to earnestness. How much more if we are ill. I thank God that you might still bring in the year 1887. And I pray to Him that He will lead you through it, strengthen and restore you, and will richly bless the year '87 in your body and soul.

Sometimes my hope increases that we will yet see you here in Kampen with restored powers. All things are possible with the Lord. That said, at all times he keeps our minds ready for His coming.

In Kampen it is very quiet, but not too quiet. For a teacher, a holiday is also refreshing, one I enjoy in my office. My books are my faithful company.

Sincere greetings to your parents and others in your household, and may God bless you,

*t.t.*⁵

H. Bavinck

Letter 4

Kampen, 2 March 1887

Beloved Friend,

You have perhaps thought that I had wholly forgotten you. I had given reason for such a thought. Since New Year you have received no word from me. Nonetheless I have thought of you often, also in prayer. But writing to you has sometimes been unintentionally delayed. However, I heard yesterday that your condition was once again not so favorable, and so I resolved to write to you immediately.

I wonder how your state of mind is? So constantly living between hope and fear, at one moment better and then worse, sometimes facing life with some courage and then again being cast into despondency! What can go on in a human soul during such circum-

5. *Totus tuus* (wholly yours).

stances! I wished that I could cheer and comfort you, but as I think of your condition I feel powerless in that regard. Could it really be the Lord's will to take you away and receive you into His glory at such a youthful age? It is indeed possible. When I hear how you are, I sometimes receive courage, but then again all hope fails me. But it goes on for so long, the path towards the good seems so far off. Often I feel sorry for you: life is so attractive, death seems so burdensome. But sometimes, momentarily, if I consider the glory of being with Jesus and understand this life in its futility and idleness, on these occasions I envy you and others called out of the fight early by the Lord.

I sincerely hope that you might always remain so, that Paul's wish would be yours: to be with Christ is by far the best. Then dying is no longer dying, and to die young even becomes a privilege. Yes, I ask it of the Lord that He might still restore you and renew your strength and health. But a Christian learns to pray after his Savior: Your will, O Father, be done. You know better than I what is good for me. Is it not a glorious thought—the weeks of the Passion remind us again—that Jesus, the Great Leader has also gone before us in suffering and death?

Following Him, imitating Him, we are also assured through Him, and then we go with Him into the deepest of deaths, but we also rise with Him out of the grave. After death follows life and the resurrection. May this rich, full Christ, who Himself is life, be all your comfort and treasure in your heavy path, my friend. If it is God's will that you must pass on, may Jesus Himself take you by the hand and lead you through the door of death into the heavenly Jerusalem. And God give grace that I might follow you sooner or later! This earth is not our resting place.

Everything carries on here as normal. Tomorrow evening I must give a lecture for the students at the *Vrije Krans* [a student meeting]. There is not much life or movement. The students are, I believe, sometimes unhappy, and not unjustly, that the typical student activities [*het "studentikoze"*] are ceasing. At present there is nothing but going from home to lectures and from lectures back home, and that gets monotonous.

Greet your dear parents and family. May God bless you in everything.

James Eglinton

Your friend,

H. Bavinck